

BEFORE THE
Federal Communications Commission
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20554

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

In the Matter of

Truth-in-Billing
and Billing Format

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CC Docket No. 98-170

COMMENTS OF SOUTHERN COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES, INC.

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Dated: November 13, 1998

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Services, Inc.

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Southern Communications Services, Inc. files this petition in response to a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) released by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on September 17, 1998 that solicits comments on telecommunications carrier billing practices.¹ The FCC seeks comments on how to modify billing formats to best protect consumers, how to ensure full and accurate disclosure of customer charges, and, finally, how to ensure customers have sufficient information to pursue billing questions. Southern Communications Services, Inc. agrees that these are important consumer protection and competition issues, and supports efforts by the FCC to consider general principles to guide carrier billing practices where appropriate. The FCC should consider only general guidelines that would universally apply to all common carriers, and impose more detailed requirements only where necessary to address specific, identified consumer issues. This approach will give carriers the flexibility to continue to adapt to customer preferences and differences in service offerings when deciding how to format bills.

¹ See *Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Truth-in-Billing and Billing Format*, CC 98-170 (September 17, 1998).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Southern Communications Services, Inc. (Southern) is a Commercial Mobile Radio Service (CMRS) provider which operates a wide-area 800 MHz Specialized Mobile Radio (SMR) system throughout its 120,000 square mile regional service area. Southern has invested millions of dollars in this state-of-the-art digital wireless communications system that provides enhanced dispatch communications, phone service, numeric and text paging, and mobile data services. Developed initially to support the service crews of Southern's affiliated utility operating companies, Southern's system now supports tens of thousands of external customers, the bulk of which are commercial or industrial users, state and local government agencies, and public safety organizations. The Southern 800 MHz SMR system provides service for these customers in rural and urban areas, which include Alabama, Georgia, southeastern Mississippi, and the Florida Panhandle.

II. COMMENTS

A. The FCC Should Develop Rules of General Applicability that Account for Differences Amongst Carriers

2. The FCC should recognize that not all classes of telecommunications carriers present the same consumer protection or competition concerns. For example, many of the concerns raised by the FCC in its NPRM are more relevant to carriers that predominantly serve residential users, such as Local Exchange Carriers (LECs), than to more specialized SMR carriers such as Southern. Because LECs often bill residential customers for services of other carriers, there is an increased risk of "cramming," the unauthorized addition of telecommunications services, and "slamming," the unauthorized switching of the presubscribed long distance carrier. Of necessity, LEC bills tend to be more complex because they reflect not only multiple services, such as long distance and paging, but also multiple providers for each of

those services. However, the FCC should not view the wireless market segment as having the same characteristics as the more traditional residential phone market. From Southern's experience, the competitive conditions in the wireless market have encouraged carriers to be as responsive as possible to customer billing preferences.

3. As a CMRS carrier, Southern's customer base consists predominantly of commercial or governmental entities that tend to be sophisticated consumers of telecommunications services. Typically, before initiating service, these customers negotiate a service contract outlining the specifics of their individual service plan. Accordingly, these customers have more in-depth involvement in the purchase of (and billing for) the services that they are taking from Southern. In addition, Southern's bills, while reflecting charges for multiple services, do not reflect charges from any other service provider.² This eliminates any risk of cramming or slamming. Furthermore, carriers such as Southern, which operate in the highly competitive wireless market must be, and are, responsive to customer's preferences as to billing formats. As evidence of its success in this regard, consumer complaints about billing clarity are minimal, and satisfaction about billing appearance and format is high.

4. As a result of these differences, Southern believes that the FCC should only consider establishing broad policy guidelines that would apply universally to all carriers, rather than developing detailed billing requirements that all carriers must follow regardless of their unique circumstances. For example, a requirement that billing carriers list charges by service provider, for example, might be appropriate in the LEC billing context, but is not relevant in an SMR context where there may only be one provider on the bill. Likewise, while the FCC has suggested in its rulemaking that additional information should be provided on bills, surveys

² For example, Southern's bills do not include roaming charges from other service providers. However, Southern's bills divide the charges for each service it offers, for example, interconnected phone service, paging or dispatch, into separate sections on the bill.

conducted by Southern of its business customers show clearly that they want less and not more detail on their bills. Providing general guidance to carriers will allow LECs, wireless carriers, and others to tailor their billing formats to the specific needs of their customers. This is not an area of regulation where a “one size fits all” approach is beneficial.

B. Carriers Offering Non-Traditional Voice and Data Services Face Unique Obstacles in Providing Detailed Billing Information

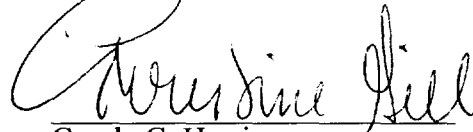
5. In regard to the FCC’s solicitation of specific proposals for describing services and providers on bills, Southern asks the Commission not to require call-specific information for services other than traditional interconnected voice on customer bills. The FCC has asked whether carriers should itemize calls for each service and provide detailed information, to include the length of each call. Southern believes that the traditional voice billing format, which details every call, is not necessarily adaptable to non-traditional voice services, such as digital dispatch, or paging or mobile data. For example, itemizing every data transmission and providing the duration of the communication will not help customers understand their charges when they are not charged according to the duration of the transmission, but according to the volume of data transmitted. In the case of digital dispatch communications, the volume of dispatch calls, which are of limited duration, is so great that itemizing each call would result in inordinately lengthy customer bills. Southern does and can provide that information for its interconnected phone service customers. Southern urges the Commission, however, to keep in mind these practical limitations when carriers are providing non-traditional voice and data services as it considers how much detail to require on bills.

III. CONCLUSION

6. Southern supports the Commission's goals of increasing consumer protection and consumer choice by mandating improvements to current telecommunications carrier billing practices where problems are known to exist, for example, in the case of cramming and slamming abuses. The Commission should not, however, attempt to fashion detailed billing requirements that may be burdensome to customers, particularly when concerns about consumer protection and competition do not exist. There are tremendous practical difficulties associated with developing a set of detailed requirements with which all common carriers must comply. As a result, Southern respectfully urges the Commission to consider developing only general principles that direct carriers to provide accurate and easy to read bills, but allow carriers the flexibility to adopt billing formats most appropriate for their customers. This approach will enhance consumer protection and choice by forcing carriers to be responsive to changing customer demands in order to remain competitive.

Respectfully submitted,

**SOUTHERN COMMUNICATIONS
SERVICES, INC.**

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Carole C. Harris", is written over a horizontal line.

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on this 13th day of November 1998, I caused true and correct copies of the COMMENTS OF SOUTHERN COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES, INC. to be served via hand delivery on:

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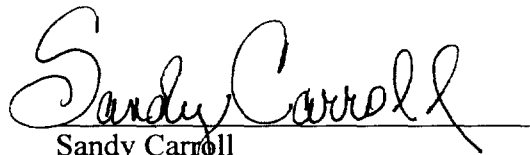
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